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KREMLIN OUTLOOK

BY BARTON REPPERT

WASHINGTON (AP) -- THE SOVIET UNION IS HEADED FOR A MAJOR CRISIS BY THE END OF THE DECADE THAT COULD CONFRONT A NEW KREMLIN LEADERSHIP WITH TOUGH CHOICES BETWEEN SWEEPING ECONOMIC REFORM OR STEPPED-UP "IMPERIAL EXPANSION," AN EXPERT ON THE SOVIET UNION SAID WEDNESDAY.

MYRON RUSH, A PROFESSOR OF GOVERNMENT FROM CORNELL UNIVERSITY, TOLD A SENATE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE HEARING ON THE IMPENDING SOVIET SUCCESSION THAT 75-YEAR-OLD PRESIDENT LEONID I. BREZHNEV "HAS FAVORED GUNS OVER (ECONOMIC) GROWTH. HE HAS POSTPONED THE DAY OF RECKONING, BUT IT CONTINUES TO GROW CLOSER."

MOSCOW'S "ECONOMIC-POLITICAL CRISIS" LATE IN THIS DECADE, RUSH SAID, WILL BE "BROUGHT ON BY THE FAILURE OF THE ECONOMY TO PROVIDE THE RESOURCES REQUIRED TO SUSTAIN THE EMPIRE (IN EASTERN EUROPE, AFGHANISTAN AND ELSEWHERE) IN COMPETITION WITH THE WEST."

A NUMBER OF WESTERN KREMLINOLOGISTS HAVE SPECULATED THAT YURI V. ANDROPOV, 68, AND KONSTANTIN U. CHERNENKO, 70, BOTH COMMUNIST PARTY SECRETARIES AND FULL MEMBERS OF THE RULING POLITBURO, SEEK TO HAVE THE BEST CHANCES OF SUCCEEDING BREZHNEV. UNTIL EARLIER THIS YEAR, ANDROPOV WAS CHIEF OF THE SOVIET KGB SECURITY POLICE.

THIS VIEW WAS ENDORSED AT WEDNESDAY'S SESSION BY JERRY F. HOUGH OF DUKE UNIVERSITY, WHO DESCRIBED ANDROPOV AND CHERNENKO AS THE "LEADING CANDIDATES." HE ADDED THAT BOTH OF THEM "SEEM TO BE STRONGLY ON THE PRO-DETENTE SIDE" WITHIN THE POLITBURO.

"I THINK THERE'S AN EXCELLENT CHANCE THAT RATHER SIGNIFICANT REFORM WILL COME QUICKLY" AFTER BREZHNEV IS GONE, HOUGH SAID, FORECASTING MOVES TOWARD REFORM OF THE STAGNANT SOVIET ECONOMIC SYSTEM, SLACKENING OF THE MILITARY BUILDUP AND POSSIBLY "A REAL SOVIET PEACE OFFENSIVE."

HOWEVER, RUSH CAUTIONED THAT "OUR LIMITED INFORMATION ABOUT ELITE POLITICS SOMETIMES LEAVES US OPEN TO SOVIET MANIPULATION."

AS PART OF THE DEVELOPING POWER STRUGGLE IN MOSCOW, HE SAID, "ANDROPOV'S PEOPLE FOR SOME MONTHS HAVE PROPAGATED THE NOTION THAT BREZHNEV IS FINISHED POLITICALLY AND MEDICALLY, AND THAT ANDROPOV IS AN INTELLIGENT LIBERAL WHOM THE UNITED STATES SHOULD WELCOME AS HE PREPARES TO ASSUME THE LEADERSHIP FROM BREZHNEV."

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